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ABSTRACT

International education continues as a tradition and practice inherited from ancient times. However, it poses many challenges and unresolved problems that are reflected in the concerns of individual students, their host countries, and educational institutions. The present study examined the nature of Chinese students' adaptation to U.S. culture so that student organizations and student service professionals may become more sensitive to and conscious of their needs. The study was conducted at a southern university with an approximate enrollment of 22,000 students, of whom 52 students were from the People's Republic of China. Data were gathered primarily through participant observation, unstructured interviews, and semistructured interviews. Four Chinese students and one international student advisor (U.S.) were selected as key informants for the study. Four principal areas concerning Chinese students' adaptation and adjustment were identified: (1) financial difficulty; (2) cultural differences; (3) academic concerns; and (4) language ability. To help international students adapt smoothly to U.S. culture, and universities in particular, university personnel and international student service professionals must realize that international students have common adaptation problems and they also have problems peculiar to their own cultural groups. (LLL)

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The Adaptation of Students from the People's Republic of China to an American Academic Culture

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Abstract

This article reports a study about the adaptation of students from the People's Republic of China to American culture. Participant observation and key informant interviews were primary methods used in collecting data. The study identified four major areas of concern to PRC students: (1)financial difficulty, (2) cultural differences and social interaction, (3) academic concerns, and (4) language ability. Implications of the study is discussed.

The Adaptation of Students from the People's Republic of China to an American Academic Culture

International education continues as a tradition and practice inherited from ancient times, however it poses many challenges and unresolved problems that are reflected in the concerns of individual students, their host countries, and educational institutions. Since the Sino-US relationship normalized in 1979, cultural exchange between the two giant nations has been increasingly expanding. Thousands of students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) have come to institutions across America for education, and today there are approximately forty thousand students from the PRC studying in this land. As the East meets the West, "culture shock" is inevitable and a major concern for foreign students. It has been found when people experience a new cultural environment, they are likely to experience conflict between their own cultural predispositions and the values, beliefs and opinions of the host culture (Briggs & Harvard, 1983). American culture is so different from Chinese culture that Chinese students just should not be left alone to deal with bitter "culture shock". The present study examines and clarifies the nature of Chinese students' adaptation to American culture so that student organizations and student service professionals may become more sensitive to and conscious of their needs.

Related Literature

Adaptation is defined as the satisfaction of those needs related to survival, or the process whereby an individual accommodates to an environment. Adjustment and assimilation are necessary components of

adaptation. According to Surdam and Collins (1984), for international students, the adaptation variables include the following items: housing, communication with Americans, dating or marital matters, discrimination, finance, food, immigration, studies, physical and psychological well-being, participation in university activities, and contact with American students, families, and Americans in general.

In the past decades, many studies have dealt with international student adjustment, assimilation, and adaptation. Researchers have investigated students' cultural and national backgrounds, environmental and social interactions, English proficiency, personal characteristics, and international student programing (Surdam and Collins, 1984). In a qualitative study primarily using ethnographic interview techniques, Heikinheimo and Shute (1986) found that foreign students find language skills, academic issues, and social interaction the most difficult adjustment problems. They also found that foreign students are more likely to have positive academic and nonacademic experiences if they can adapt to and enjoy a satisfying contact with the host community, and their successful achievement of academic goals is more likely if the emotional and social atmosphere is pleasant and the environment congenial (Heikinheimo and Shute, 1986). These results clearly indicate the importance of understanding international students and accordingly helping them adjust to the host culture.

However, most of the past studies have sampled international students either as a whole or classified as Asian, African, or European. Few studies have focused on students from the PRC as a group quite different from others, even from Chinese students from outside China. In a comparative study, Perkins (1977) found that most Chinese students had problems in English proficiency and dealing with racial or religious discrimination, homesickness, separation from family in the home country, and

unfriendliness of people from the community which hinder their adjustment to American culture. Importantly, it should be realized that international students have both common problems and problems peculiar to their own national groups (Perkins, 1977). Then, what is peculiar to Chinese students from the People's Republic of China? How do PRC students adjust to American culture? What are their adaptation problems and concerns? How do they survive and go through advanced education in America? Those are questions to be explored in this study.

Methodology

The study was conducted at a Southern university with an approximate enrollment of 22,000 students, of whom, 52 students are from the People's Republic of China. Among 52 PRC students aged from 19 to 43, there are 15 females and 37 males. All of them except one undergraduate and 5 non-degree students are studying for their graduate degrees, of whom, 14 are working on their doctoral degrees, 32 on their master's. Some are government-sponsored, and some self- or family-supported. They spread across campus, mostly majoring in sciences and mathematics. The length of stay ranges from three months to four years. They all are from major cities of PRC, and mostly from universities or research institutions.

An ethnographic approach was used in this study. Data were gathered primarily through participant observation, unstructured interviews, and semistructured interviews. Four Chinese students and one international students advisor (American) were selected as key informants for the study on the basis of their knowledge about Chinese students, their personal experience as a Chinese student or others working closely with international students, their ability to articulate their experiences, and their willingness to share ideas. The key informants included an

international students advisor, the vice president of Chinese Students Association (CSA), a female Chinese student who has been in the school for about one year, a male math student who just came three months ago, and an officer of Public Relations for Chinese Students Association. They were interviewed in an informal, conversational style with primarily open-ended questions. In addition, one participant observation was made about CSA presidential election with follow-up interviews. Fieldnotes were carefully taken during interviews, and interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed. Related documents on international students were also collected.

Findings and Discussion

Four principal areas concerning PRC students' adaptation and adjustment were identified and discussed as follows: financial difficulty, cultural differences and social interaction with Americans, language ability, and academic concerns.

(1) Financial Difficulty

All the interviews clearly indicated that financial problems were of the greatest concern for PRC students. Most PRC students in this study, either sponsored by the Chinese government or by their families, were under heavy financial pressures. As one international students advisor commented:

> For PRC students, financial problem is number one. Money is their main concern. Students funded by the Chinese government receive only a little stipend ($400 a month). It's amazing how they live in the States with so little money.

Because of financial difficulty, it is not surprising for most of them to live a rather modest life. They have to struggle to survive with limited

financial resources. The CSA vice president revealed:

> Financial problems are a headache for us PRC students. It's our major concern. ... All of us have to be extremely careful about our spending. We cannot buy what we want, even not what we need. We get to look at the price first before we buy anything. It is not unusual for three or four Chinese students to share a modest two-bedroom apartment. It is not unusual for some of us to have several jobs, to work on weekends, holidays. ... We are struggling to survive.

Some Chinese students have to work after school, doing heavy labor and earning minimum wages to support living. Because of American Immigration Laws, they are banned from work permits to work legally off-campus. To survive they work off campus and risk being found by immigration and sent back to their home country.

Economical support determines to a great degree not only how they live in the States but also how American universities are chosen. They usually select schools based on expense and financial aid sources rather than academic reputation. They usually apply to a number of not-so-well-known universities, though they come from major Chinese institutions. Attendance is based on types of financial aid available. As one international students advisor of this university observed, " For PRC students, the main reason (for them to come to this institution) is money. Most of them get some sort of graduate assistantship or financial aid. ... And also the living expense and tuition are relatively low." One Chinese student even put it straightforward, "I would go wherever I could get money. This institution offers me a teaching assistantship, so I am here. You know, no money, no nothing." One Chinese student even changed her major because of financial concern. Although she received only half graduate assistantship(GA) from the department, she decided to transfer. For her, like most Chinese students, even half a GA is much better than having nothing. "If you have GAship, even half, you pay only in-state

tuition, much less than out-state tuition."

Interviews with Chinese students consistently indicated poor economic conditions in PRC China as one major reason for their financial difficulty. "China is a developing nation, and Chinese people make much less money than people in developed countries." commented the CSA vice president. "Although both my parents make relatively good money (in China), they cannot give me any financial support. ... Even if they save up every penny for years and years, they can never save enough to pay my tuition. Gosh!"

In general, their financial situation is closely related to and has negative impact on other areas such as participation in social activities, academic achievement, social interaction, and English language skill. Due to financial difficulty, "they have to work on weekends, holidays, or after school. ... They do not have time to participate in many social activities." They have to live together, so they speak Chinese all the time and have no opportunity to practice English after class, their social interaction is heavily centered within Chinese community, isolated from the host culture.

(2) Cultural Differences and Social interaction

PRC students find American culture quite different from their own and it is difficult for them to adjust and socialize with Americans. American culture values individuality, competition, and independence; in sharp contrast, Chinese culture values collectiveness, and cooperation. American culture values self-expression, whereas Chinese emphasize self-control. American culture respects various religions, whereas communist China shows no respect for religion. "You know, we are from a quite different country. We have different cultures, different values, and different behavioral modes. It makes me feel hard to socialize with

Americans. I don't know how to communicate with them, how to behave in class, how to make friends with them..." commented one Chinese student.

They often feel they do not have common topics, interest, and lack of mutual understanding. Americans talk about football, baseball, and so on, but PRC students know little of American sports. Americans tell jokes, but Chinese fellows have little understanding of American joking. "From time to time, there are some social activities... but you see only a few PRC students participating... That's partly because we do not know how to participate, or how to behave in a social situation... We do not have common interest, no common topic", as the CSA vice president explained.

Interviews with Chinese students consistently revealed that religious difference often makes them uncomfortable. Most young Chinese do not have any religion at all. They grew up in communist China where religion was once forbidden and unpopular. They show little interest in religious belief. As one Chinese student reported,

> This city is very religious. But in China, few people are interested in religion. We grew up in a communist society. We have been educated by communist doctrine since we were little. Of course many people here are friendly, and willing to help foreign students. But, they often talk about God, and try to convince you to believe in god, which make many of us uncomfortable.

> Although host families can help you understand American culture, I think they are often too religious. They are so much interested in religion. They give you Bible, and want you to spend time reading the Bible. On Sundays, they take you to local church. I don't like that.

Like religion, holidays are also part of culture. Americans and Chinese have different holidays at different time and celebrate in different ways. For example, America celebrates Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, and so on, differently Chinese celebrate Spring Festival, Moon Festival, and so on.

"Americans have many holidays through the year. They take off from work, and get together with family. But on Chinese holidays, we are in the States, we do not take days off. We have to go to class and do homework. There is no atmosphere that we can gladly celebrate. Therefore, we feel lonely and homesick, especially since most of us do not have family here."

Due to contrasting cultural differences, Chinese students tend to form their own community, and isolate themselves from the host culture. As the international students advisor explained,

> Chinese culture is self-sufficient. They are ready to help each other. As new students come, old ones always help them, show them around, and teach them about America. Also they tend to live together, interact with their Chinese fellows, and so they form their own social community and isolate from others.

Consequently, they are further isolated from American culture and lack of culture understanding. It impacts negatively on their cultural adjustment and English language proficiency. They interact with Chinese in Chinese.

(3) Academic Concerns

Heavy academic pressure is commonly experienced by international students. Chinese students in this study were either supported by the PRC government or by their families, and they are generally expected to perform well. Chinese students in this study generally do quite well academically. They generally appreciate their opportunity to study in the States, value education, study hard, and are very purposeful and successful. As the international students advisor observed,

> I don't think Chinese students have big problems. They are smart and hard-working. They know their major purpose in the States is study. ... They want to spend all time studying. ... They value education, and culturally they respect educated people.

An interview about the CSA 1989 annual presidential election supported the point, "Many of us study very hard. Many of us go to library working on our assignment or any kind of school work. We all are under great academic pressure. We are either sponsored by government or family to study here. If we can't do well in school, we will feel embarrased or lose face. ... Because our purpose here is for education, for academic achievement".

> I believe PRC students who can come to study in foreign countries are very capable, competent, and successful. Education in China is extremely competitive. Only those most outstanding, most capable young people can go for higher education. Every year, only 4 to 6 percent high school graduates can pass nationwide entrance examination to colleges, even fewer college graduates can go to graduate school, and of course it is extremely difficult to be sent abroad. Most PRC students are selected and sent abroad by very competitive standards by government. They must be talented in their academical areas.

Initially, PRC students , like most international students, may have problems adapting to the American setting because of language difficulties. Reportedly, they have difficulty understanding lectures, taking notes, answering questions, and writing essays. These problems are generally experienced by new students. As one new student reported, "I cannot catch up with what the teacher says in class, so I can hardly take any notes. But some exams are based on notes. They drive me crazy." After one or two semesters, they can adapt fairly well, along with language proficiency.

Academic concerns are experienced differently by PRC students depending on majors. Sciences students generally adapt better than social sciences students. This has to do with requirements for language

proficiency and cultural understanding. In general, sciences do not require as many or high competence in language skills as do social sciences. Social science students need to be able to take notes, participate in class dicussion, write papers, and answer essays. Also, social sciences require better understanding of American culture, values, and social systems.

> Cultural differences may not have much effect on science studies like maths, or physics, but it can be a problem for students in social sciences. I study business, and I find our political system is so different from America's. Sometimes I can hardly understand how it works in the States. We have different culture, different values, different social system, all are closely related to economics, financial system.

> Math students may not have a lot of writing assignment, or essay in exam. If you have good listening comprehension, and reading ability, you may be able to do computation with no language difficulty. But sociology students, education students, ... must have good listening, reading, writing , and communicating abilities. As I observed, social science students generally are better in English than science students.

> You see, I am a Mathematics major. I believe I can do better than most of my classmates, so I don't have any big academical problems. ... I have to spend a lot of time (on homework). It is not because they are difficult, but there is so much, you must spend a lot of time. I know I have difficulty understanding professors' jokes, or outside topics in class, but I do believe I can understand classes. Writing may be difficult, reading is easier. Fortunately we do not have many writing assignments.

(4) Language Ability

To adapt successfully to American culture, like all other international students, PRC students must master both conversational and formal English, the former for daily communication and social life and the latter for academic achievement. Generally, PRC students in this study have

serious initial language problems. They have difficulty understanding class and taking notes, understanding English idioms, and Southern accent, and jokes. As the CSA vice president admitted, " Most PRC students have some language problems at the beginning. They have difficulty catching up. It takes half a year or even longer for them to reach English language proficiency."

> I think the main problem (for me) is language. I cannot catch up with what the teacher says in class. ... They drive me crazy. ... It's a shame to say, I was majored in English language and literature when I was an undergraduate in China.

> We learn standard English in China, but we know little idiom. People here speak with southern accent, talk in idioms, so that we can hardly understand. I have trouble understanding American jokes. When they laugh, I don't know what they are laughing about, which makes me feel bad. But I believe My English is getting better than before.

Their language difficulty often keeps them from participation in social activities. "They are afraid of being embarrased because of language problems. They think they cannot speak good English and it is hard for them to communicate with others", commented one students advisor. Further, the CSA vice president explained,

> Some of us can speak good English, but most of us could not speak fluently when we first came. You feel embarrased if somebody asks you "Pardon me?", "Could you say it again?". After a couple of times, you would rather close your mouth. If you have only limited vocabulary, you cannot have a large range of topics that you can talk about with others. You may know it, but you can't express youself. So Chinese students often appear quiet.

A cycle in language ability and social interaction may exist. PRC

students are afraid of being embarrased because of language problems, so they withdraw from social activities and form their own social community and interact within the community in their native language, Chinese. Their interaction within the Chinese community further hinders their language improvement. "If you live with your Chinese fellows, you speak Chinese all the time. You don't have chance practicing your English language. But most Chinese students do live with Chinese. ... They live together, speak Chinese, and isolate from others", explained the international student advisor.

In conclusion, discussion above on PRC students adaptation problems clearly suggests that they generally have problems in financial aid, cultural adjustment and social interaction with Americans, academic concern, and language ability, which seems to be common problems experienced by all international students. This study clearly indicated PRC students have those adaptation problems. Further, it is evident that all the problems are closely related to one another, have impact on one another. They are not isolated problems.

Implication

To help international students smoothly adapt to American culture, and universities in particular, university personnel and international student service professionals must realize that international students have common adaptation problems and, importantly they also have problems peculiar to their own cultural groups. Chinese students on a whole share same culture, but because of historical, political and other factors, they also differ in many ways, therefore they must be studied separately as well as in one group. It should be realized that each national group is unique, and certainly students from the People's Republic

of China is in many ways different.

Because adaptation is a process that blends academic, social, financial, and language-related elements, orientation programs for Chinese students should concern all these areas rather than a purely social theme. International students should be offered assistance in meeting all the necessary needs such as financial needs, social needs, rather than solely academic objectives. Students from the host country may be recruited and carefully trained to help their peers through what is often a maze of initial adjustments. The already existing host family program, which is good in many ways needs to be evaluated and refined if necessary.

Because each culture has its own values and norms, there is no culture better than another. Therefore, international students should be encouraged to adopt a receptive and on the other hand, open view concerning their life-style in the country; their own culture should be respected, and valued.

In general, many adaptation problems of international students remain relatively unknown to academic and support staff of universities and colleges. Workshops may be arranged for university personnel who are in daily contact with foreign students to help them understand the adaptation problems and to develop encouraging and supportive response patterns.

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